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ABSTRACT

Humor is an excellent teaching tool because, in addition to preventing classroom boredom and monotony, it introduces lateral aspects of language such as irony, sarcasm, mockery, elision, ellipsis, and euphemism. Humor in language can be approached interactively or structurally through a variety of activities. It can be used to expand vocabulary, encourage discussion, examine meaningless words and expressions, introduce double-sense words and expressions, investigate ways of expressing ideas and their implicit intentions, develop syntax and grammar, provide cultural information, and teach phonetics. Cartoons (provided by the teacher or produced by the students), jokes, headlines, advertising, quotations with mistakes, and even classroom humor provide opportunities for language learning. Teachers can file these materials in a variety of ways to maximize their usefulness. (MSE)

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Humor: An Excellent EFL Teaching Device

Albert Lopez Guindal

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language

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HUMOUR: AN EXCELLENT EFL TEACHING DEVICE

INTRODUCTION

Humour is actually an excellent teaching tool; let's say, at least for those teachers that don't like stiff necks in class, but, on the contrary, a friendly atmosphere.

Humour is not only a source of student cheering up but, what is more important, a means to introduce lateral aspects of language such as irony, sarcasm, mockery, ellision, ellipsis, euphemism, etc. The age level of the groups which those aspects are meant for will depend, of course, on the kind of humour and the implicit intention they represent. The use of humour is also a strategy in the teaching of expression and communication. Humour is only an ingredient, something that gives flavour to the dish, the language classes. The theme or topic of the humour we choose will also depend naturally on the students' maturity. Humour is, therefore, an excellent device for the setting of thought provoking situations in which underthoughts (irony...) mustn't be forgotten. Somebody said once that "Humour is often half the fun..." and I would add that the other half depends on the moment, the learners and the relationship of the teacher with their students. Something that we, teachers, always have to bear in mind is that the learner may not know what we are up to, but everything will turn right if we don't leave much room for improvisation; in other words, THE END JUSTIFIES THE MEANS (I will add that if the means is something well thought of, so much the better).

Ap.III,no.13

Humour is also a good device to prevent from class boredom and monotony, and makes a good tool for language communication. In other words, HUMOUR makes the MEAL more SPICY and TASTY.

One of the ways in which humour can be presented is that of cartoons which reflect an aspect of our society and, therefore, thanks to their setting make us identify with them, understand their meaning, and ... laugh.

In general, cartoons are specially meant for adults, for the nature of the jokes and their psychological and cultural background, although many cartoons can perfectly fit in a class for children.

Healthy humour shows up every now and then in the atmosphere of the class room; you don't have to run after a joke: it comes up spontaneously. However, sometimes it is necessary to foresee the desired effects of the piece of humour, in order to prepare a follow up activity which does not fag the effect achieved out.

How shall we approach humour?

1) INTERACTIVE APPROACH: type of activity or goal?

2) STRUCTURAL APPROACH: goal? What means?

To tackle one specific point of our syllabus, we have a wide scope of alternatives to choose from. That is for example:

We want the learners to work out the order of modifiers (adjectives). The different alternatives we have include:

- Supply several cartoons to the students
- Acronyms/new acronymization.
- Cartoons without caption, which students have to design.

Another example could be that of concessive clauses:
The students devise different concessive clauses which go with the cartoon story of the appendix: SUICIDE ATTEMPT.: although, but, nevertheless, etc.

Ap.II, no.7

Different activities with cartoons

1. As a means of expanding the range of vocabulary.

The acquisition of new vocabulary is an important goal in the teaching/learning of a foreign language, and by playing with words, their meaning usually becomes something familiar to the students. Working with cartoons needn't be an activity to carry out within each language session. Many times, however, the teacher will feel that part of the class time can be spent on dealing with some kind of humour. It all depends on the language aspects which are being tackled. Here are some of the activities with cartoons in an EFL class.

Cartoons are particularly useful because their richness in particles, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, etc. makes them very often self-explanatory.

Sometimes a previous cultural background is essential, but there are some aspects of our society, or simply geographical aspects which are universally known, thus needing no explanation.

The student can be asked to find a synonym, antonym, etc, and guess the meaning of a word by giving a satisfactory explanation of what he understands.

2. To encourage discussion in the classroom.

One way of achieving that purpose is by providing the students with incomplete information. The students are presented with a cartoon whose caption has been removed previously and their imagination will do the rest without any orientation from the part of the teacher. If the picture is somehow misleading, the results will be heterogeneous, due to the contrast.

Ap.II, no.6,7

If it is a speechless cartoon what is being tackled, the highest interaction among the students within the group will have been created, and the results are most of the times likely to be surprisingly satisfactory.

Ap.I,no.1-4
Ap.III,10-12

The exercise can be just the opposite, i.e. the students only have the caption,and should be encouraged to make a picture, either written or spoken, of what they imagine the cartoon is showing. To end up, the original picture, photocopied, or in OHP transparency will be shown to the students.

A combination of the two examples above is the jigsaw-type exercise. The students divided in groups are assigned either a caption or a picture and have to guess what is missing. Since there may be two or three cartoons around the class at the same time, the final step which is that of matching caption and cartoon drawing will be an interesting one.

A different presentation of the latter activity can be as follows: several texts or captions are handed out among the students and then their corresponding pictures are displayed on a fairly wide table (e.g. the teacher's). Then,the students are told to match the captions with the pictures. If the class is of about thirty students, the number of jokes could be about the half. Once the paptions and the pictures have been matched, they can be seen by all the students without much difficulty.

Another exercise is that of assuming the role of the characters, or one of them, as a continuation of the joke.

Many times the basic activity of the class relies upon the efficiency and

enthusiasm of the learners. It is the teacher's task that of creating a pleasant atmosphere which motivates even the weakest or shiest students to participate. That is the case when there is a pair-work activity in the teacher's mind which involves the participants in a non-stop dialogue, e.g. an interview.

Then, the place of humour here could be an exercise which focusses the students' attention in producing speech segments. And, depending on the level, the exercise could be more or less difficult.

The tool which is very useful for the case is the OHP, in that it concentrates the whole class attention on the same place: the screen; at the same time: one speaks, the rest listen to him/her. The teacher encourages the group to feel integrated. The last part of the cartoon is essentially the climax, so to call it, of the whole story and gives room to an open laugh; keep it and ask the students to make guesses. The value of the unexpected is enormous.

3. Meaningless words and expressions.

A meaningless word is chosen from a caption and the students are asked to provide the right meaning or an explanation that clearly enlightens the meaning. Thus you can show the students how our mind works and draws the meaning of unknown words. They needn't look up each unknown word in a dictionary, when reading a long text. This exercise can also be done by whiting out expressions or words, and replacing them with meaningless units.

4. Double-sense words and expressions.

Sometimes, the cartoonist makes the joke out of the simple words -although misleading- in a given situation. When there is no double intention on what the speaker says, the second intention is, of course, in the listener's (or reader's) mind.
The students can be asked to produce a cartoon or cartoons of their own, which include a metaphor, euphemism, or other kinds of rhetoric figure. Sometimes, newspaper headlines, adverts classified, or quotations including some kind of mistake, are excellent sources of information for that purpose.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP. 1) DON'T SMOKE IF YOU ARE PREGNANT OR IF YOUR WIFE IS PREGNANT.

G.Murphy (Nursing Times)

I CANNOT GET SICK PAY. I HAVE SIX CHILDREN. CAN YOU TELL ME WHY IS IT?

UNLESS I GET MY HUSBAND' S MONEY SOON, I WILL BE FORCED TO LEAD AN INMORTAL LIFE.

IN ANSWER TO YOUR LETTER, I HAVE GIVEN BIRTH TO A BOY WEIGHING TEN POUNDS. I HOPE THIS IS SATISFACTORY.

IN ACCORDANCE WITH YOUR INSTRUCTIONS, I HAVE GIVEN BIRTH TO TWINS IN THE ENCLOSED ENVELOPE.

(Excerpts from Letters Actually Received at E.O.L.C.)

Acronyms can also be used as a means to an end, i.e. to create new meanings, and humorous ones, indeed!

	EEC	Exportation of English Cabbages
	PLO	Polite Ladies Organization
		Pidgeon Leisure Organization
	BBC	Black Boys Corporation
Ap.III, no. 12b	FAO	Federal Aeronautic Organization
	FBI	French Books Industries
	DNA	Do Not Annoy!
	NATO	Now All Together are Out

5. The way of expressing ideas and their implicit intention.

The attitude of the cartoonist is something that can be worked out with upper-intermediate or advanced students. For instance:

approval, disappointment, certainty, indifference, gratitude, hope, regret, fear, willingness, etc.

The teacher, therefore, can attempt to grasp the students' opinion in relation to the cartoon, by asking questions, such as:

Does anyone in the picture show...? (behaviour)
Who?
Why?
Don't you think that...?
Do you all agree...? etc.

Ap.III, no.13 Jokes and comic cartoons inform readers and give them a message but, at the same time, with its comic setting, they release the reader from emotional strain. Humour is the way the cartoonist uses to somehow compensate his anger for being unable to make something different.

6. Developing syntax and mastering grammar in the FL.

If the only goal we pretend to get to is a grammatical aspect, either as a reinforcement of structure recently worked out in class, or just for revision, the jokes also find their place there and we have an endless range of possibilities. The same cartoon stories can be used for the mere purpose of grammar, and a list of items could be prepared with that purpose in mind.

Some of the items could be:

sentence/noun modifiers and order of modifiers
conjunctions
prepositions
adverbs and adverbials
verb tenses
article: definite and indefinite, etc.

Although a second classification might be one of language functions, such as:

asking for something
making suggestions
ordering
apologizing, etc.

And also a third list could be added to the other two, which dealt with more specific language items, like :

IT'S TIME + pron. + past (V)
ONLY (before subject), etc.

One cartoon may, therefore, serve different purposes:

asking for advice
showing sarcasm and dissatisfaction
the use of which in questions
the connection of several adjectives, etc.

7. Cultural background.

The cultural background of many countries can be studied through the press and humour, in general, thus learning habits, education, politics, sexual relations, behaviour in different situation, dresses and clothing and others. A good number of cartoons relating politics can be found in well-known newspapers (daily or weekly editions), such as:

Guardian Weekly
The Observer, etc.

which mainly deal with topics of our present society, missiles, economics, pollution, East-West relations, and many other themes of paramount importance in our days.
The social relationships are also evident through the cartoon and constitute an inherent behavioural aspect. A good number of cartoons show the numerous ways which people use to address to one another, i.e. superior to subordinate, child to parent, seller to buyer, etc.

8. Puzzle-solving activities.

Quite an entertaining while productive number of exercises comes from preparing puzzle-solving activities with cartoons.
A good exercise is that which consists in trying to make out the story. The first step is to make an OHP transparency, out of the cartoon which also includes the caption, if any. For some clarity on the screen, it is preferable to divide the story into as many parts as frames, thus enabling the teacher to enlarge the picture as necessary. Then, the teacher can hand out the different parts of the cartoon to the students so that no part of the cartoon is distributed twice. i.e. only one story within the class. For example, if there are twenty-four students and the cartoon consists of six parts, it makes one part per each four students. In case the story is rather short and the number of students quite large -for instance, four frames and thirty students- the class could then be split into two major groups of fifteen and the story be distributed twice, i.e. once within each large group, at the rate of about one frame per each four students, and so on.
Sometimes, a complex cartoon may be used for the sake of creativeness, identification and sequence coordination and cohesion, but the different parts of the cartoon story will be arranged in the wrong order on the OHP, thus being the students' task that of rearranging them in a sensible sequence line. If the teacher finds that to work with only one group could be messy, he can form several independent groups which look at the screen

Ap.III,10-11

or have a photocopy of the cartoon, and then they number the frames and explain why they proceeded that way.
In other occasions, the teacher gives the students one section of the cartoon and tells the group to create a story out of their drawing and predict whether it comes first, middle of last within the story.

9. PHONETICS.

Rhymes and lymericks are excellent means to do phonetic work.

10. Classification and filing suggestions.

Filing materials is something that depends on the teacher's preference. Here are, nevertheless, a few suggestions which may be helpful:

1. Write whatever notes on back of cartoon,

   a) grammatical aspect/s
   b) language function/s
   c) level
   d) others

   As a reference guide to start a structure file in four levels, there is the book by L.G. Alexander and other authors, published by Longman:

   ENGLISH GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURE

2. Divide the materials into four levels ,

   a) beginners
   b) lower intermediate
   c) upper intermediate
   d) advanced

3. Since only one classification is not complete in itself, the materials could be filed according to its TOPIC (grammatical aspect), but a system of cross reference should be made pointing to their CATEGORY (type of information given , or communicative function). Cross reference may, therefore, be written on the back of the cartoon -after sticking onto a piece of cardboard. The cards should be all the same size but have a colour code as level reference, e.g.

   green - beginners
   yellow - lower intermediate
   red - upper intermediate
   blue - advanced

   A very simple and clear filing system is that of putting the jokes and cartoons/cartoon stories in one section of the file after numberging.

4. The materials in the file should be -as far as possible- the originals or very clear photocopies of them, for further photocopying when necessary.

5. To prevent from scratches, dirt, or any other damage, they can have a coat of self adhesive transparent sheet.

6. To help with quick search, you can design a chart -the model below may help- with two coorddinates, one for lang uage functions and the other for grammar points, although many other graphics can be designed for the same materials but with different aspects shown on the coordinates. The chart can be as large as the teacher wants it to, and include as many items depending on the categories of the cartoons.

Ap.IIII, no. 14

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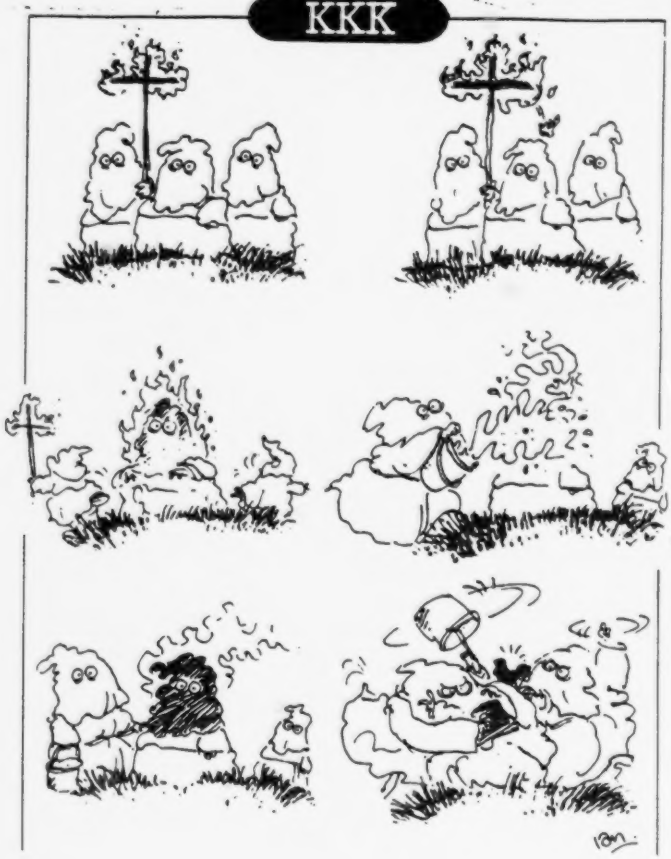
I wish to thank Ms Caroline Parton for giving me permission for the use of PUCH copyright material.

Albert López Guindal
1985

APPENDIX I -

1



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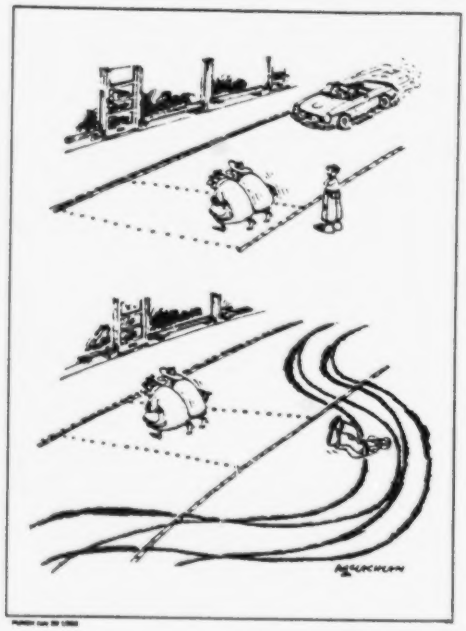

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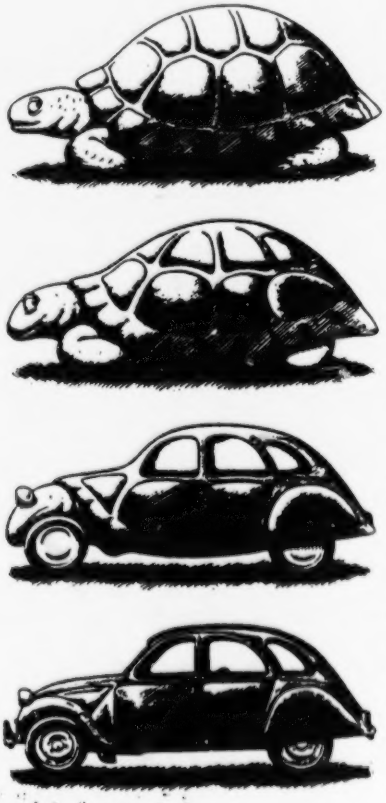


4

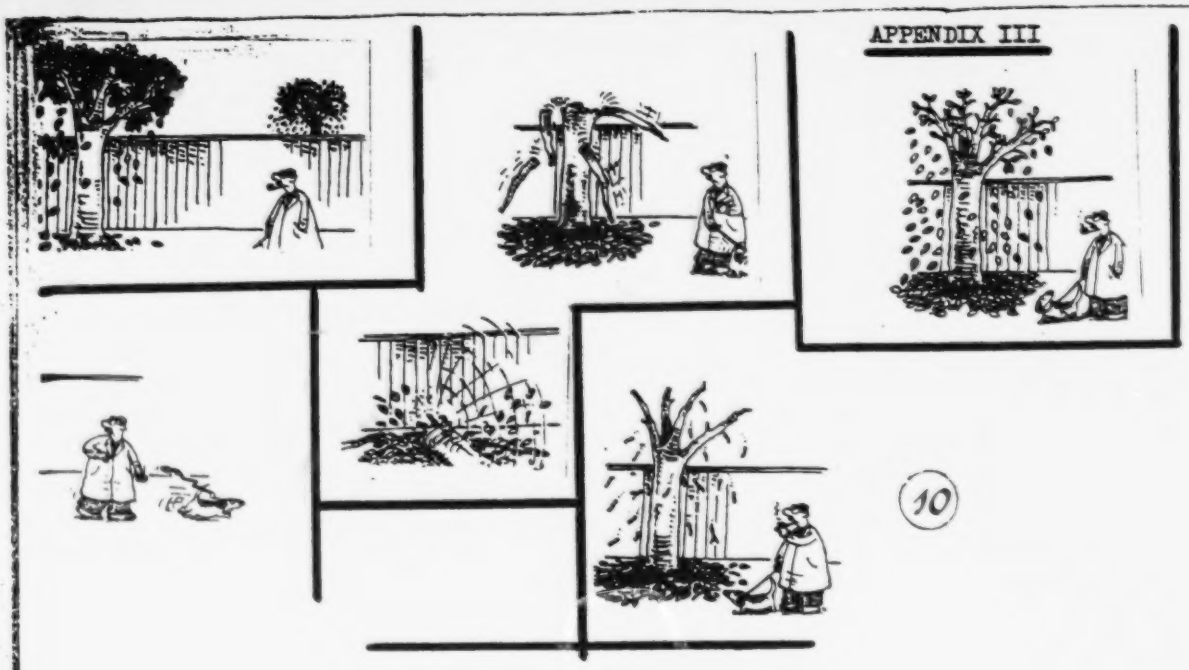
Write an advertisement for each of these products:

from AVS and I
Baker, Avis.

APPENDIX II

WHAT'S IT TO BE TONIGHT, THEN ? — WHITE ASPARAGUS, FILET DE BOEUF EN CROÛTE, BAKED CAULIFLOWER CHEESE ?
CALORIES WITH PALATE SPACE FOR PILLS WITH FETTUCCINI FILLING BASED MARROW PARMESITE POTATOES ?
OR PERHAPS POMMES FLAMBÉES, GRATIN-À-LA-GRENOUILLE, FRENCH BEANS MIMOSA ?
WHAT ABOUT THE ZOO-NAVIAN ? — OUT WAIT — I THINK I HAVE IT
WHAT I'D REALLY LIKE IS A NICE...
5
6
7
8
9
3 (??)
(??)
"For God's sake, man! Think of your wife and children!"
It was the largest Gilbey's and tonic they had ever seen

APPENDIX III



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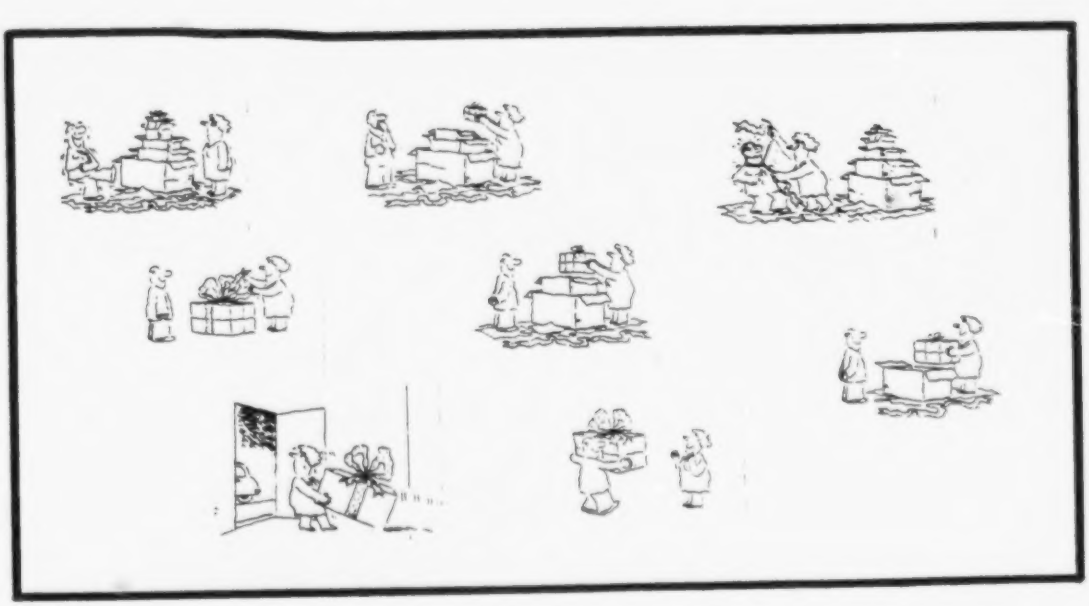
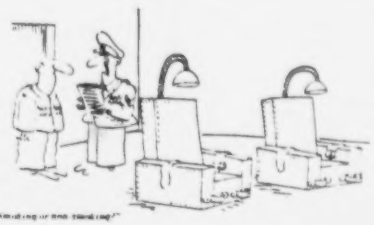


11

12

12b

"Forget ETA. In our book, it merely stands for Estimated Time of Arrival."



"Don't worry, sir, it is alive!"

Policeman admiring the 'Made in Britain' label on demonstrator's shirt

13

14